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THE GENESIS OF AN OPERATIONAL COMMANDER:
GEORGI K. ZHUKOV AT KHALKIN GOL

by

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of
Khalkin Gol and the Operational Art of
Marshal Georgi Zhukov

The Red Army's defeat of the Germans during the Second World War is one of the great achievements in military history. The military man most responsible for that victory was Marshal Georgi Zhukov. Though less well known than some of his German or allied counterparts, Zhukov was a brilliant practitioner of a distinctive, and uniquely Soviet, style of operational art. This style was first tested against the Japanese Kwangtung Army at Khalkin Gol in Mongolia. Zhukov's operational scheme at Khalkin Gol was the prototype for his later successes at Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk.

Zhukov and the Red Army came of age together. Both rose from the ashes of the Tsarist Army and endured two decades of war, debate, reform and crisis. While Zhukov rose through the ranks of the cavalry, the Red Army underwent a period of great intellectual activity. By the mid 1930's, Soviet military theorists began to explore new concepts of successive or "deep" operations that promised to avoid the positional warfare of World War One. During this period, Zhukov became an avowed "tankist" and was extremely well placed to participate in this "renaissance."

When Stalin launched his purge of the Red Army in 1937, Zhukov was a Corps Commander. Though interrogated at length, he survived. In 1939, Zhukov, then a Deputy Military District Commander, was summoned to Moscow. Zhukov was relieved to find that he had been ordered to proceed to Khalkin Gol in Mongolia where Soviet troops were facing a Japanese incursion across the border.

After assessing the situation, Zhukov prepared a plan to drive the Japanese out of Mongolian territory. Upon assuming command and conducting a massive buildup of combat power, Zhukov launched a devastating offensive spearheaded by massed tanks and artillery that would become the prototype for Soviet offensives during the Second World War.

Preface

History is constantly subject to revision. However, the case of Marshal Georgi Zhukov may be unique among World War II commanders. For fifteen of the first twenty years following the end of the war, Zhukov was an "unperson." Twice, he was accused of "anti-party" activities and "bonapartism". Former rivals and subordinates were openly encouraged to question Zhukov's military abilities and accomplishments. As a result, his contributions were nearly erased from Soviet accounts of the war. Twice, they were later reassessed and rewritten.

Zhukov's falls from grace complicate the study of Soviet operational art. Primary Soviet sources dating from the twenty years following the war rarely mention the Marshal's operational role. As a result, otherwise valuable works on the major operations at Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk frequently failed to address Zhukov's role.

This paper draws most heavily on works written since the mid 1970's. Recent works have not only the benefit of Zhukov's increasingly uncensored memoirs, but also the Soviets' (and Russians') increasingly frank discussion about their former leaders and the conduct of "The Great Patriotic War". A paper submitted twenty years ago would likely have reached entirely different conclusions about Zhukov and his military record.

Introduction

[Zhukov] "... had had longer experience as a responsible leader in great battles than any other man of our time."¹

- General Dwight Eisenhower

The Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War ranks among the great achievements in military history. After twenty years of crisis, reform, and enormous expansion, the Red Army was essentially decapitated during the purges of 1937 to 1939. A year later, the world was surprised to see the Soviets have great difficulty defeating tiny Finland. It is little wonder that few in the west gave the Red Army a chance against the German Army, or *Wehrmacht*. When the German invasion did come in June of 1941, the Soviets were decimated. Within five months, the Germans had effectively surrounded Leningrad, were on the outskirts of Moscow and over five million Soviet soldiers were dead or prisoners of war. Yet, the Red Army rebounded from these calamities. Sometimes clumsily, and never cheaply, it fought off the Germans and drove them all the way back to Berlin.

The military man most responsible for the Soviet victory was Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov. With the benefit of several post *glasnost* works, it is now clear that Zhukov was a central figure in virtually every Soviet victory. It was Zhukov who stabilized the defense of Leningrad. It was he who commanded the defense of Moscow and launched the December 1941 counterattack that drove the Germans back. It was Zhukov, along with General Vatutin, who planned Operation *Uranus*, the counterattack that encircled the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Finally, it was Zhukov who, having left the Stalingrad front before the launch of *Uranus*, began to focus on Kursk even before von Manstein's brilliant counter stroke made the obscure town an inviting target.

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1948) 467 quoted in William J. Spahr, *Zhukov: The Rise and Fall of a Great Captain*. (Novato: Presidio, 1993) p. 186.

More than any other individual, Zhukov came to personify the tough, resourceful Soviet wartime commander. This paper will assert that Zhukov was a brilliant practitioner of a highly distinctive, and uniquely Soviet, style of operational art. This style was first demonstrated in of all places, Mongolia, at a place called Khalkin Gol. There, a 42 year old Zhukov displayed the type of operational leadership, meticulous planning and preparation, as well as tenacity and a sheer ruthlessness that characterized his efforts throughout the war.

The Rise of Zhukov and the Red Army

"Outspoken man of action whose qualities are more those of the will than of the intellect. He is highly regarded in Soviet military circles and is considered to be an especially capable officer and good organizer. He was the first to stand up for the massed use of tanks and successfully carried it off in practice."²

- captured German document on Zhukov

Because Zhukov was a uniquely Soviet commander, it is necessary to examine the environment in which he developed professionally. In a sense, Zhukov and the Red Army came of age together. Both emerged from the ashes of the Tsarist army and were shaped by the subsequent twenty years of civil war, debate, reform, and crisis. The son of a shoemaker and a furrier himself by trade, Zhukov was drafted into the Tsarist cavalry in 1915 at the age of 18. He joined the new Red Army at the outbreak of the Civil War and was wounded in the defense of Tsartisyne, the city that would later be renamed Stalingrad.

The experience of the Civil War led to a bitter debate over the form the new Red Army would take. One faction, led by Commissar for War Leon Trotsky, was deeply suspicious of military professionals and argued that the Red Army should take the form of "labor armies", essentially a militia wing of the proletariat. The opposing faction, led by M. V. Frunze contended that only a professional military, guided by the Communist Party leadership could ensure the survival of the Soviet Union in a capitalist world.

What emerged was a compromise of sorts. The Red Army was allowed a general staff, a professional officer corps and professional journals. However, several holdovers from the Civil War era were retained. One was the retention of the political commissars. The Communist Party's lingering suspicion of "military specialists" led to a dual command structure which required each military

² Otto P. Chaney, Zhukov (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971) p. 16.

commander to have a coequal political commissar selected for his political reliability. Another more symbolic concession to "egalitarian" Bolshevik ideals required that Red Army soldiers neither display rank insignia on their uniforms nor salute superiors.

After the Civil War, Zhukov chose to remain in the Red Army where he became an officer in the elite First Cavalry Army. The unit had distinguished itself at the aforementioned city of Tsartisyn, where a Bolshevik official named Josef Stalin had gained recognition within the party. Lacking in formal military education, Zhukov attended the Cavalry Commanders Course in Leningrad. Upon returning to his regiment in 1926, he entered the period that would launch him on his rapid rise within the Red Army. His division and corps commanders were K. K. Rokossovsky and S. K. Timoshenko respectively. Both of these officers would rise to the rank of Marshal and work closely with Zhukov throughout the next 20 years.

By 1932, the Red Army had entered an especially productive period. Their views shaped by the experience of the First World War and the Civil War, Soviet military theorists, especially M. N. Tukhachevsky, began to explore new concepts of successive offensive or "deep" operations which sought to use speed and firepower to penetrate or flank the enemy's front and exploit his vulnerable rear areas. Like theorists in the west, the Soviets were determined to avoid the positional battles, and accompanying carnage of World War One. At the same time, the Soviets attempted to place these "deep" operations within a strategic context. In effect, they created a new level of war between the tactical level of a battle and the strategic level of the war. This intermediate level of war became the basis of operational art. One Soviet writer summarized: "Tactics make the steps from which operational leaps are assembled, strategy points out the path."³

³ A. Svechin, Strategy (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1926) quoted in David M. Glantz, When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1995) p. 8.

This theoretical combination of "deep" operations and operational art led the Soviets to envision a large mechanized army employing tanks, massed artillery, and aircraft in addition to the infantry. In truth, Soviet industry was a decade away from being able to provide these tools in the quantities needed. Nonetheless, the Soviets formed their first mechanized corps in 1932, three years before the Germans formed their first panzer divisions.

As a cavalry officer, Zhukov was perfectly situated to participate in this renaissance. After becoming an avowed "tankist", he had the opportunity to serve as an observer in the Spanish Civil War. By the time Zhukov returned to the Soviet Union in 1937, he had risen to Cavalry Corps Commander. However, the fortunes of the Red Army were about to change.

The Red Army was the last major Soviet institution to undergo Stalin's purges. Between 1937 and 1939, over 40,000 Soviet military officers were removed from service. The victims included every military district commander, 13 of 15 army commanders and 57 of 85 corps commanders. At least 20,000 officers were executed, including Tukhachevsky.⁴

While Zhukov was interrogated about his friendship with Rokossovsky (who was imprisoned for two years) as well as his past verbal "abuse" of political commissars, he survived the purges. However, the purges essentially decapitated the Army around him. Zhukov would later recall: "They hardly succeeded in moving a man to a high position, when you next looked, he had been arrested as an 'enemy of the people' and the poor devil was wasting away in the basements of the NKVD."⁵

In 1938, Zhukov was assigned as deputy commander of the Belorussian

⁴ Chaney, p. 31.

⁵ Georgi K. Zhukov, Reminiscences and Reflections (Moscow: Novosti, 1990) p. 224.

Military District. In June of 1939, he was summoned to Moscow. Zhukov thought he might be on his way to prison, or worse. Instead, he was ordered to proceed to Mongolia, where Soviet and Mongolian troops were combating a Japanese incursion across the Mongolian-Manchurian border. The destination was Khalkin Gol.

Khalkin Gol: The Soviet Prototype

"I think it [Khalkin Gol] will become the second perfect battle of encirclement in all history."⁶

- Colonel General G. M. Shtern, Military District Commander

The Battle

The Khalkin Gol, also known as the Halha River, parallels the Mongolian-Manchurian border 30 kilometers to the east (see figure 1). The border dispute between what were by then the People's Republic of Mongolia and Manchukuo was actually over 200 years old. The Japanese incursion was only the latest in a long series of border clashes. However, it was by far the largest. The Japanese Army of Manchuria, the Kwangtung, sought to test Moscow's will as well as block a principal route for Soviet aid to China. On the other hand, the Soviet leadership, facing continued crisis in Europe, was determined to avoid a future two front war by teaching the Japanese a lesson. As John Erickson would write: "Zhukov could have had no illusions about this assignment: failure was out of the question. To win and win decisively, even spectacularly, would alone suffice."⁷

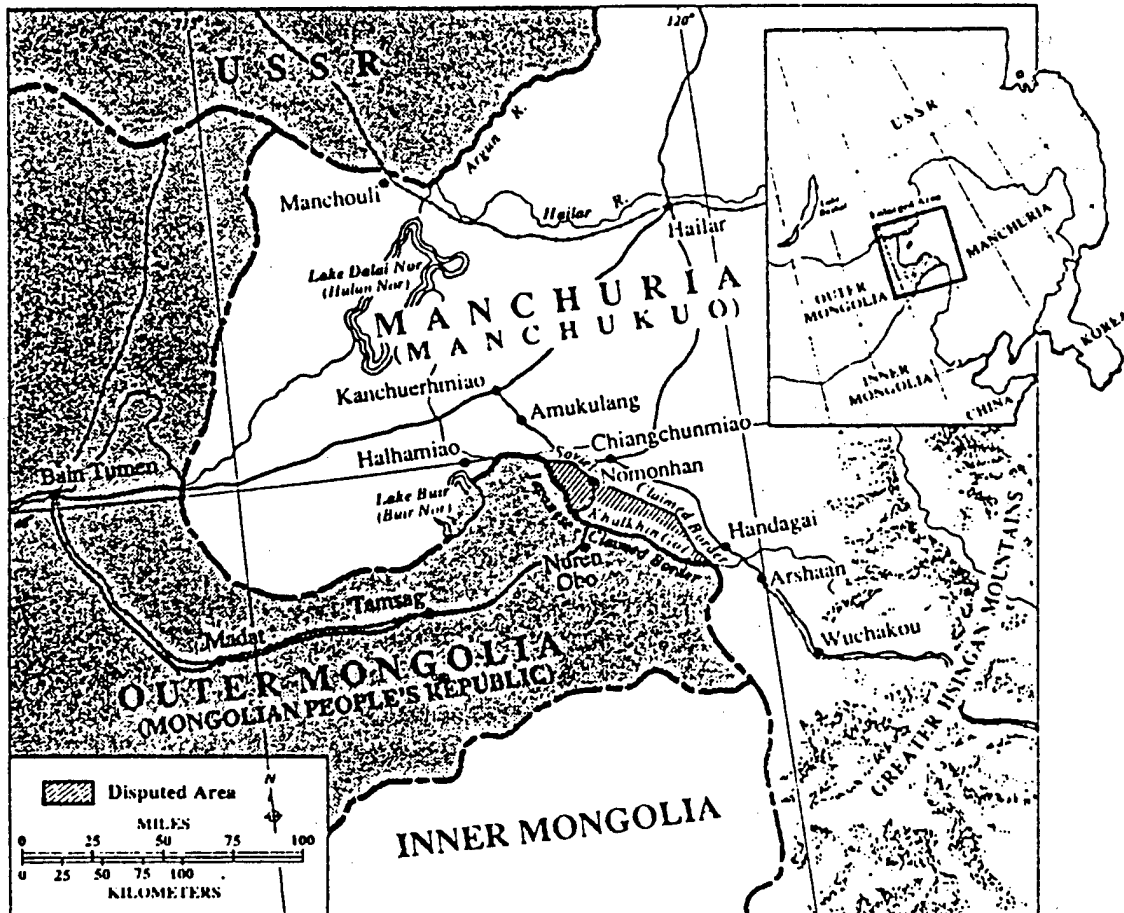
Zhukov arrived at Khalkin Gol on 5 June, 1939 and was immediately appalled to find the field commander's headquarters 120 kilometers from the front. Once at the front, he found approximately 12,500 Soviet and Mongolian troops facing nearly 30,000 Japanese. The Soviets occupied positions just east of the Khalkin Gol.

The command structure at Khalkin Gol was typically Soviet. Though the Military District Commander had jurisdiction, Zhukov reported directly to Commissar for Defense Voroshilov. Marshal Voroshilov, a longtime crony of

⁶ Christopher D. Bellamy Joseph S. Lahnstein, "The New Soviet Defensive Policy: Khalkin Gol 1939 As Case Study," Parameters, (September 1990) p. 19-31.

⁷ John Erickson, The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History 1918-1941 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984) p. 522.

Figure 1.
The Mongolian-Manchukuo Border



Source: Christopher D. Bellamy Joseph S. Lahnstein, "The New Soviet Defensive Policy: Khalkin Gol 1939 As Case Study," *Parameters*, (September 1990), p. 20.

Stalin's, was notoriously weak and incompetent. So, in effect, Zhukov reported to Stalin.

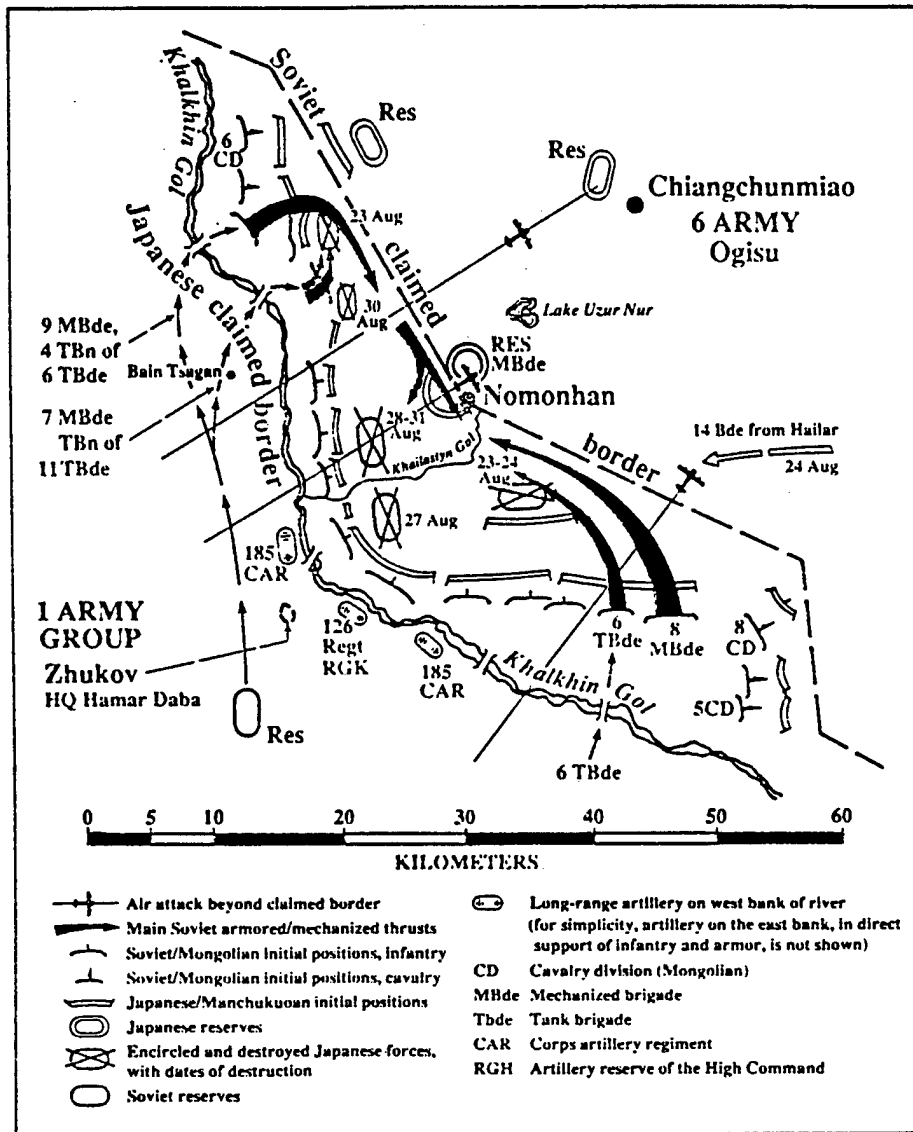
After surveying the terrain and troop emplacements, Zhukov concluded that additional forces would be required to hold against further Japanese attack. During July, the Japanese launched two attacks to drive the Soviets back to the western bank of the river. However, both assaults failed. After the first Japanese attack, Zhukov presented a plan to Moscow for an attack that would drive the Japanese from Mongolian territory. Once Stalin approved the plan, Zhukov assumed command and accelerated the build-up of forces.

Even though the Japanese had increased their forces to more than 40,000 men, the Soviets still managed to achieve numerical superiority by early August. Zhukov's expanded force included 60,000 Soviet and Mongolian troops and was spearheaded by over 500 tanks. In 1939, Khalkin Gol was more than 600 kilometers from the nearest railway. Accordingly, the entire Soviet build up had to occur via horse and truck over terrible roads. Through the constant use of deception or *maskirovka*, Zhukov sought to mask the movements of his troops and any signs of an impending offensive. The Soviets instigated artillery duels each night to mask the noise of their preparations, keep the Japanese awake and prevent them from changing their positions.

On the morning of 20 August, Soviet aircraft and artillery pounded Japanese positions as well as reserve formations in the rear areas. Soviet tanks supported by infantry attacked over a 60 kilometer front. By the second day, two especially strong Soviet formations enveloped the Japanese on both flanks (see figure 2). By 23 August, the Japanese had been completely encircled. Zhukov immediately set out to destroy the trapped Japanese. After a week of vicious fighting, the pocket was completely secured by 31 August. Of the nearly 30,000 Japanese trapped in the

Figure 2

The Operation at Khalkin Gol, August 1939



Source: Christopher D. Bellamy Joseph S. Lahnstein, "The New Soviet Defensive Policy: Khalkin Gol 1939 As Case Study," *Parameters*, (September 1990), p. 23.

encirclement, barely 400 escaped to Manchuria.

It is difficult to accurately gauge casualties during the operation. The Soviets acknowledged nearly 18,000 killed and wounded. The Japanese conceded 30,000 killed and wounded. However, the Soviets placed Japanese casualties at 52,000. In any case the outcome was clear and Tokyo had learned its lesson. On 15 September, two weeks after German and Red Army forces invaded Poland, Japan, Mongolia, and the Soviet Union signed a cease fire.

The Prototype

Khalkin Gol was a proving ground for Zhukov and operational art. In what would become the prototype for the Red Army's great victories of the Second World War, Zhukov put into place several elements of Soviet operational art. While the following list is by no means complete, they are the most critical elements of the Zhukov style:

1. Great attention to Sustainment (logistics)
2. Surprise through Deception
3. Mass at the Main Point of Attack
4. Operational Maneuver
5. A thorough understanding of the Culmination Point
6. Operational Reserve
7. Operational Leadership

Beginning at Khalkin Gol, intensive logistic preparation became a Zhukov hallmark. The Japanese underestimated the Soviets in many ways. In particular, they never imagined the Soviets would be able to sustain a large combined arms force on the Mongolian frontier, nearly 600 kilometers from the nearest railway. Yet, during the artillery duals leading up to the offensive, it was the Soviet gunners who were able to fire several rounds to each fired by the enemy. This was true

despite the fact that the Soviet supply lines were much longer than those of the Japanese. This would again set the pattern for later operations against the Germans. Time and again, Zhukov ensured that operational plans included the logistic underpinnings necessary for success. This often extended beyond food and ammunition. One example is evident at Kursk, where the Germans lost hundreds of tanks due to damage or mechanical breakdown. German tank recovery and repair units, operating from the rear, were simply unable to get to the front. The Soviet tank repair battalions, on the other hand, operated with the armored units themselves. Though they were exposed to higher losses, the Soviet tank repair units were able to quickly return hundreds of broken down or damaged tanks to combat.

Zhukov's distinctive use of deception in order to achieve surprise is also evident at Khalkin Gol. Troop movements were carried out at night. Tanks with their mufflers removed were constantly driven along the front to desensitize the Japanese to the sound. In order to convince the Japanese that the Soviets intended to remain on the defensive, loudspeakers were used to broadcast the sound of pile-drivers and construction equipment building emplacements. Handbooks on defensive operations were even handed out to the troops. Zhukov would later use similar techniques to mask troop concentrations prior to the counteroffensives at Moscow and Stalingrad. Both attacks were virtually complete surprises.

As mentioned, Zhukov used deception at Khalkin Gol to mask what would become one of his trademarks: mass at the main point of attack. The Japanese expected to be outnumbered when the Soviet attack came. However, they were not prepared for the profound Soviet superiority on both flanks. This was achieved by massing artillery and armor, in addition to infantry. Again, this would establish a model that Zhukov would employ at Stalingrad, Kursk, and especially during the

final assault on Berlin in 1945. Throughout the years 1943-45, the Soviets faced a chronic shortage of infantry.⁸ Yet they were able to achieve mass through their increasing superiority in artillery and armor.

Khalkin Gol was the first demonstration of the devastating operational maneuvers employed by Zhukov. For the first time, the Soviets were able to put in place the necessary leadership and combined arms to attempt the deep operations envisioned by Tukhachevsky. Zhukov's double encirclement of the Japanese was what would become the classic pattern for Soviet encirclements: an outer front of mobile forces to fend off attempts to relieve the encircled force, while an inner front, largely infantry in this case, worked to destroy the trapped enemy. Zhukov repeated this same maneuver on much grander scales in encircling the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad as well as much of Army Group Center in Belorussia during 1944.

At Khalkin Gol, Zhukov also displayed his keen understanding of the principle of culmination. The Japanese had probably already passed their culmination point when their first July offensive was unsuccessful. The combination of combat losses, fatigue, and long supply lines had reduced their combat power relative to the defenders. Zhukov was determined to attack as soon as his preparations were complete and before the Japanese could regenerate their strength. Again, the pattern was set for Zhukov's later operations during the war. At Moscow, Stalingrad and especially at Kursk, Zhukov skillfully exploited the German's culmination. This approach is evident in a proposal Zhukov wrote to Stalin months prior to Kursk: "It would be better if we grind down the enemy in our defenses, break up his tank forces, and then, introducing fresh reserves, go over to a general offensive to pulverize once and for all his main concentrations."⁹ This

⁸ Soviet manpower shortages are discussed in Glantz, When Titans Clashed and Albert Seaton, The Russo-German War 1941-1945 (Novato: Presidio, 1993).

⁹ John Erickson, The Road to Berlin, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), p. 68.

would become a chillingly prophetic description of the operation.

Khalkin Gol would also typify Zhukov's later major operations in that it featured an extremely large operational reserve employed at the climactic moment. Prior to the offensive in August, the Military District Commander felt that Zhukov's operational reserve was so large that it starved the attacking force and jeopardized the entire operation. Zhukov prevailed and after the initial double encirclement, the operational reserve was vital not only to fighting off Japanese attempts to relieve the trapped force, but to destroying it as well. Zhukov would later encounter similar second guessing from Stalin, particularly at Stalingrad and Kursk. At Kursk, Zhukov retained an entire *Front* (Army Group) in reserve. By doing so, he was able to dispatch a Guards Tank Army (nearly 1000 tanks) to meet and defeat a German breakthrough at the climactic battle of Prokhorovka. As Zhukov had forecast months earlier, the Germans had been ground down and were stopped cold.

While this paper is not focused on operational leadership, it was clearly an essential element of the Zhukov style of operational art. Like other great commanders, Zhukov possessed the ability to focus on the objective and then formulate a operational vision. One of his peers would later write: ". . .he [Zhukov] was distinguished not only by a truly iron-hard persistence in attaining an established goal, but also by a particular originality of thought. In our exercises he quite frequently amazed us with something unexpected."¹⁰

In particular, Zhukov exhibited what Captain Barney Rubel described as the "vision" component of operational leadership. Captain Rubel identifies the primary element of vision as "the ability to recognize the kind of fight you are in".¹¹ At

¹⁰ Chaney, p. 78.

¹¹ Barney Rubel, "Operational Level Leadership," (Newport: Naval War College, 1996) p. 3.

Khalkin Gol, Zhukov recognized the nature of the fight he was about to undertake. The operation's objective was not simply to regain Mongolian territory; it was about dissuading the Japanese from future moves against the Soviets in the Far East. As Christopher Bellamy and Joseph Lahnstein wrote: "There was nothing defensive about the conduct of the battle itself, or indeed about the plan to trap and destroy the Japanese forces (there was never any question of simply pushing them back: that would not have had been a permanent solution and would not have had the required traumatic effect)."¹²

The second component of "vision" is laying out a road to victory. Here again, Khalkin Gol is illustrative. Previous Soviet commanders had employed their forces piecemeal and had fought on terms favorable to the Japanese. Zhukov saw the need for build-up and preparing the battlefield through deception and maneuver. Critically, Zhukov was patient even under pressure from Moscow. This pattern was repeated throughout the war. At Stalingrad, Zhukov was able to convince Stalin that the key to victory was not holding each and every block of the city. Rather, the key was to wait while drawing the German Sixth Army in deeper and deeper, until it was vulnerable to encirclement and destruction.

Zhukov also displayed Captain Rubel's second component of operational leadership: influence.¹³ Influence is defined as the ability to gain influence over subordinates and have them act as the commander would desire in unforeseen circumstances. Zhukov was a master of this, albeit in a manner Captain Rubel probably never envisioned. Zhukov used fear. At Khalkin Gol, a territorial division (militia) occupied a key sector in the fixing force. When the assault began on 20 August, the territorial division experienced immediate difficulties. When the

¹² Bellamy and Lahnstein, p. 19-31.

¹³ Rubel, p. 3.

division commander told Zhukov that he could advance no further because of heavy casualties, Zhukov relieved him. Later, when the deputy commander made the same claim, he too was relieved by an officer from Zhukov's staff. The division continued the attack. Throughout the war, Zhukov threatened subordinates with relief, arrest or even execution.¹⁴ Given Zhukov's access to Stalin and the NKVD, the threats were not idle.

¹⁴ Dmitri Volkogonov, Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy. (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, 1988) p. 466.

Zhukov Reassessed

"In the constellation of Soviet generals who so conclusively defeated the armies of Nazi Germany, he [Zhukov] was the most brilliant of all."¹⁵

- A. M. Vasilevsky, Marshal of the Soviet Union

"Zhukov was the butcherer of the Russian peasantry"¹⁶

- V. Astaf'ev, Russian writer

Despite the fact that Zhukov either "coordinated" or commanded in every major Soviet victory from the defense of Moscow through the final assault on Berlin, he is rarely mentioned in the same breath as von Manstein, Patton, or even Montgomery. There has remained a lingering perception in the west that the Soviets succeeded more due to their seemingly endless pool of manpower, the sheer ruthlessness of the leadership, and crucial German mistakes, than through any operational or tactical skill of their own. The two quotes cited above illustrate the conflicting views of Zhukov. In particular, Zhukov's critics have tended to focus on three issues: 1) that he did not do enough to convince Stalin of the need to prepare for the German Invasion; 2) that he succeeded through overwhelming numbers, and 3) that he was indifferent to high casualties.

It is clear that Soviet preparations prior to the German invasion were terribly inadequate and equally clear that Zhukov bears some of the responsibility. That Germany someday intended to invade the Soviet Union was widely known within the Red Army. In fact, in a December 1940 wargame of such an invasion, Zhukov, playing the Germans, was able to decisively defeat the Soviets. Stalin was so angered by the outcome that he fired the Chief of the General Staff and replaced

¹⁵ Lawrence G. Kelley, "The Soviet Soldier in World War II: Death is But Four Steps Away," Parameters Vol./Issue (Winter 1997-1998), p. 171.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

him with the very junior General Zhukov. However, in this capacity, Zhukov and Commissar for Defense Timoshenko (Zhukov's former Cavalry Corps Commander) were more preoccupied with correcting the Red Army's shortcomings exposed in the war with Finland, than with preparations for a showdown with Germany.

By April of 1941, Zhukov was very aware that German troops were massing along the Russian frontier. In May, he submitted a plan for a flexible defense in depth of the frontier. Stalin declined to approve the plan. Why Stalin refused to face the imminent German attack is beyond the scope of this paper. Zhukov himself was torn on this issue. He conceded in his memoirs that he should have tried harder to convince Stalin. However, he also knew there were limits with Stalin and that the result may have been "Well, Beria, take him to your basement."¹⁷

With regard to numbers, the experience at Khalkin Gol is illustrative. Though the Soviets achieved superiority at the main points of attack, the overall Soviet superiority was hardly overwhelming, on the order of 1.2:1. During the Second World War, Zhukov defended Leningrad and Moscow with forces roughly equal to the size of the Germans. Even at Stalingrad, Zhukov possessed at most a 1.3:1 overall superiority. It was only at Kursk, and the subsequent series of offensives in Belorussia, Poland and Germany that Zhukov enjoyed overwhelming superiority. Throughout Zhukov's career, it was his ability to use deception to mask his massing of forces at the main point of attack, more than sheer numbers, that proved decisive.

With regard to casualties, Zhukov's legacy is more checkered. That the Red

¹⁷ N. G. Pavlenko, "G. K. Zhukov: From Unpublished Reminiscences," *Kommunist* Vol./Issue (September 1988): 99 quoted in Spahr, Zhukov: The Rise and Fall of a Great Captain, p. 51.

Army suffered grievous losses throughout the war is indisputable.¹⁸ It is equally clear that Zhukov's victories were won at an enormous human cost. Having said that, huge Soviet losses may have been inevitable for several reasons.

First and foremost, Zhukov and the Soviets defeated the Germans at the Operational and Strategic levels, without ever matching them at the tactical level. While Khalkin Gol was a great success, the debacle in Finland one year later was a better indicator of the Red Army's readiness for war. The combination of enormous expansion (940,000 personnel in 1936 to 4,200,000 in 1941) and the purges left the Red Army with junior to mid-grade officer and non-commissioned officer (NCO) leadership that was greatly inferior to the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht prided itself on *Auftragstatik*, which relied on a common understanding (often down to the NCO level) of the commander's intent and then decentralized execution. However, the Red Army of 1941-43 had no equivalent to *Auftragstatik*. The purges had exactly the opposite cultural effect and the Red Army was never known for developing initiatives in subordinates. The result was that the Soviets remained tactically inferior, especially in the coordination of combined arms. Soviet infantry often attacked German positions with poorly coordinated support, or no support at all. The results were deadly. By 1944, the gap had closed. The Soviets, with better leadership and equipment, became proficient enough tactically to overwhelm the Germans. However, the damage in human terms had already been done.

Another cause for Soviet casualty rates was Stalin himself. Like Hitler, he often intervened and ordered commanders to either hold ground when withdrawal made more sense, or to continue the offensive when consolidation was called for. The debacle at Kiev in 1941 is a classic example. Zhukov urged that Kiev be

¹⁸ Post *glasnost* estimates of Soviet war casualties are staggering, up to 40 million. Military casualties are thought to number 28 million dead, wounded and missing, roughly three and one half times the German total on the Eastern Front of eight million.

abandoned before the Red Armies were encircled. Stalin refused and removed Zhukov as Chief of the General Staff. Weeks later 600,000 Soviet soldiers were killed or captured at Kiev. Even after the Soviet successes at Moscow and Stalingrad, Stalin remained distrustful of complex operational maneuvers and favored the simpler frontal attack.¹⁹

Finally, it must be said that Zhukov, like the regime he served, possessed a darker side. Particularly during the final drive on Berlin, he was not above ordering frontal assaults and often used "penal battalions" consisting of soldiers arrested by the NKVD (Internal Security Troops) as cannon fodder.²⁰ In the end, Zhukov may have been a "butcherer" as well as "the most brilliant of all."

¹⁹ See Zhukov's description of Stalin's disinclination towards encirclement operations in Georgy K. Zhukov, The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971) p.479.

²⁰ The NKVD arrested two million Soviet soldiers during the war; enough men to man 200 divisions. For a chilling description of the NKVD's operations, see Parish, Michael. The Lesser Terror: Soviet State Security, 1939-1953 (New York: Westport, 1996).

Conclusion

"Zhukov is my George McClellan. Like McClellan he always wants more men, more cannon, more guns. Also more planes. He never has enough. But Zhukov has never lost a battle."²¹

- Joseph Stalin

It seems curious that Stalin chose to compare Zhukov to George McClellan rather than to the seemingly more similar Ulysses S. Grant. Perhaps Stalin, ever on the guard for potential rivals, was thinking less of military similarities and more of General McClellan's political challenge to his former Commander in Chief in the 1864 presidential election? In any case, the Soviet dictator did not wait for the Soviet version. By mid 1946, Zhukov was disgraced and cast out to command the obscure Odessa Military District. His offense was "bonapartism".

In fact, the comparison to Grant is more appropriate. Like his American counterpart, Zhukov has often been overlooked in favor of the opponents he defeated. While Lee and von Manstein were the artists known for their rapier like thrusts and counter strokes, Grant and Zhukov have typically been portrayed as more clumsy and brutish.

Yet like Grant, Zhukov was able to overcome a tactically superior foe at the operational and strategic levels. Both generals were able to look beyond the battle at hand, keep the strategic objective in focus, and employ operational art to achieve that objective.

What lessons can we learn from Zhukov? The most obvious is that we should not expect other nations to practice operational art exactly as we do. The Soviets used their form of operational art to defeat an opponent that was technologically and tactically superior. Soviet operational art, as practiced by Zhukov would have been unsuitable for France, Britain, or the United States. The price of defeating the Germans is beyond most westerners comprehension.

²¹ Chaney, p. 38.

However, the Red Army ultimately won a crushing victory over Germany. American policy makers and commanders should be vigilant to avoid the mistake of the Germans. Our next opponent will probably lack our technology and training. That does not mean that he will not have ways of attacking our vulnerabilities.

The second lesson learned is that those nations employing former Soviet doctrine are likely to employ large operational reserves. If properly led and employed, these formations could be very dangerous against U.S. and coalition forces. They will be attractive targets for U.S. operational fires. At the same time, American commanders must be on guard for their own forces' culmination and the risk of enemy counter attack. The next Zhukov could be waiting out there.

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